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## THE TENANT SYSTEM AND SOME CHANGES SINCE EMANCIPATION

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The close of the Civil War marked a great change in the labor system upon the plantation. The Negroes who were held and considered as property of masters previous to emancipation were now free men, having as their principal asset good conditioned bodies. The matter of serious import which confronted these simple, but strong, people was the task of making a living in a country devastated by war. Former masters were confronted with problems equally as difficult as those confronting the former slaves. These masters had been deprived of what represented both labor and property; war had left them for the most part landowners, and nothing more. The task of starting a new life was equally difficult for both concerned—the landlord with land and accessories, the freed man with physical strength and a slave's experience. The first two or three years after the war, were, therefore, a period of readjustment between land and labor under new and trying conditions.

Immediately after the Civil War through the share-cropping, wage-earning and standing-wage system, labor was gradually adjusted to the soil. According to the readiness with which landlords had or could secure means, all these three systems were more or less used at the same time. In many cases, as it is today, the wage-earning and the share-cropping systems existed simultaneously on the same plantation, while on the smaller plantations "croppers" up with their crops would serve in the place of earners in assisting those behind with crops on the same plantation. When croppers served as wage hands their pay like other expenses was deducted from the croppers' share in the crops.

The share-cropping and the wage-earning systems are with us still, but the standing-wage system which was originated immediately after the Civil War is not now in vogue. The method of work got its name, the standing-wage-system, because "hands" worked for a period

of six months or a year, before a complete settlement was made. Rations were issued weekly or monthly. The wage paid standing-wage hands was \$50, \$75 and \$100 a year. This system originated with the motive of holding labor to the soil until end of crop.

That which seems to be a modified form of the old standing-wage system is the part-standing-wage system which exists today in many black belt countries in the South. Under this system a hand receives a monthly wage, which is seldom less than \$5 or over \$7. In addition to the wages paid in money he is given three or four acres of land to cultivate for his own use as a further compensation for his service. In cultivating this plot of three or four acres the "hand" is given the use of his employer's team and farming implements on Saturday when most of the work for himself is done. It is because the "hand" receives part of his wages in monthly cash payments and the remainder in a harvested crop that this system is called the part standing-wage system. The system of work appeals more to the older people than the young, so it is reasonable to suppose that it too will shortly pass away. It is evident that the chief element in the part standing-wage system is keeping uncertain labor connected principally as a wage-hand to a larger plantation system.

The four-day plan of cropping had even a shorter life than the standing-wage system. Under this system the "hand" worked four days for the landlord who in turn furnished him with land, stock, feed for stock and farming implements, with which to cultivate a farm for himself the remaining two days. This system was quite advantageous to the "hand" providing he had a family large enough to do hoe-work upon his own farm while he worked four days for the landlord. In this system a weekly ration was issued simply to the "hand" or hands who worked four days. In case there were other members of the family, other arrangements were made according to ability to give service upon the plantation or around the landlord's home. It is probable that the system died, because the landlord's profits were small and the "hand" crops were poor.

That which has been said of the standing and the part standing-wage systems and the four-day plan for cropping has been sufficient to throw some light on the attempt in early days succeeding Civil War toward adjusting labor and land. No system seems to have a more permanent effect than what is known today as the share-cropping system. For many years after the Civil War, work on

shares had a very different meaning from that which it bears today. Crops were cultivated for the one-fifth, one-fourth, two-fifths and one-third. In most cases when the cropper worked for any fractional part below one-third he received a part ration. Dividing crops into smaller fractional parts than one-half was at that time considered very reasonable by those who had served years in bondage without pay and whose demands for education and better methods of living had no likeness in comparison to what they are today. It has been less than a decade since the wants of each individual farmer and his family have so increased and the competition between landlords in holding labor upon their plantation has grown so keen that the fractional part gradually increased, until now working on shares means generally all over the Southland that at harvesting time that crop will be halved between landlord and cropper.

The word "crops" as used in verbal or written contracts has particular reference to cotton and corn. Everything raised behind the mule, except that raised on the one acre allowed for the garden and house spot, is subject to division. According to the terms of the contract, the landlord furnishes the cropper the land on which the crops are cultivated, and farming implements, plows, scooters, sweeps, stock and feed for the stock; in return for which the landlord is to have one-half of the entire crop made by the cropper and his hands. In consideration "of the above" the share cropper agrees to furnish and feed at the command of the landlord, all labor necessary to cultivate and harvest the crop and take good care of all stock implements intrusted to his care. In the event of failing properly to cultivate the crops he authorizes the landlord to hire what labor he may deem necessary to work the crop, and to deduct the cost of this labor from the cropper's half of the crops.

The landlord permits the steady, careful and thoughtful cropper to use his mule and buggy on Sundays, and use the farming implements in the cultivation of his garden or very small plot of watermelons and sugar cane. When the main crops, cotton and corn, are not in need of work, the cropper has time to cultivate his garden, and to do odd jobs on his house, fences and stables if there are any. The landlord usually provides the cropper with the available vacant house of one, two, three or even four rooms as the case may be. The size of the house, and accommodations in barn and stable readily give immediate advantage to landlord, and cropper.

It is not altogether true that the landlord keeps the stock and vehicles in his home lot. These are in most cases left to the care and keeping of the cropper if he be in possession of suitable stables and lots.

The amount of supervision a cropper receives from the landlord depends largely upon how successfully he keeps his crops (especially cotton) worked up. If he gets behind with his "crops" the landlord may compel every member of the cropper's family, and even secure members from other families upon the plantation, to clean out the crops. In case the landlord does secure others, outside of the cropper's family to assist with the crops, the landlord avails himself of the clause in the contract which permits him to hire the labor necessary to work the "crops" and to charge the cost of the labor to the cropper's half of the "crop."

As a rule the share cropper makes more to the mule than other classes of farmers. The reasons are as follows: (1) He is given the best plot of land upon which to make his "crops" because the larger the "crops" the more satisfactory will be results for both landlord and cropper. (2) In most cases supervision is very close, which is most natural since the share-cropping system involves so much capital and risk from the landlord. Here we find a condition not unlike that in every phase of occupation, an effort to get as large return as possible for capital invested.

Crops are usually divided in the presence of the landlord, during or immediately after harvesting time. The cropper gets as his share one-half of the lint cotton and cotton seed, one-half of the corn and corn-fodder, and one-half of the field peas. All products raised on the house spot acre come to the cropper, undivided. Though the terms in the contract consider everything raised behind the mule subject to division, yet sugar cane, sweet potatoes and watermelons may not be divided providing the landlord furnished neither fertilizer nor seeds for planting.

Upon almost every plantation of considerable extent some women share-croppers are usually found. They are as a rule widows with children large enough to help out with the farm work. These croppers are most common in black-belt countries, where the large plantation systems prevail. For example, one of these widow share-croppers of Macon County, assisted by her two sons, one thirteen, and the other eighteen years old, during the bad cotton crop year

of 1909, made thirteen bales to her one plow. Another whose husband died leaving a debt of \$125, and three children to care for, worked on shares during the same bad year, made ten bales of cotton to her plow, paid her debts, her expenses of living while making the crop, including half of the cost of the fertilizer used upon her farm, and saved \$150. The latter widow realizing the responsibility upon her of debt and care of children was advanced only \$35 which was used in purchasing food. The success of these two widows does not indicate by any means that women share-croppers are always successful, but it does show that under this system, because of landlords' supervision, women may succeed as well as men, providing they can furnish the labor.

As a rule the contract which explains the terms by which crops are to be cultivated and divided makes no provision for the cropper's advances or food; nor any disposition of the commercial fertilizer of which the cropper pays for half out of his half of the crops when made and divided. Terms for advances as a rule are made outside of the crop-contract. Advances in money may be issued directly through a banker with orders from the landlord permitting the cropper to have certain amounts at stated times. Usually the landlord and the cropper agree upon a lump sum of \$35, \$50, \$100 or \$200. According to the cropper's needs, this money is issued in monthly installments of \$8, \$9, \$10, \$15, and \$20. Of course the cropper does not receive the lump sum agreed upon at the time the food-contract is made for the following reasons: (1) the cropper might use his money unwisely and consequently be obliged to call upon the landlord to continue, or finish the crop; and (2) by holding it the landlord has money at his disposal for cultivating the crops if the head of the family becomes disabled, or does not stay to carry out his contract. Advances are often made through a merchant-landlord of a large plantation who may have a store of such necessities as will meet the demand of tenants upon the plantation. In case the landlord does not own a store, orders are given by the landlord to some merchant of a small town or village, or to the merchant-landlord near, permitting the cropper to have certain amounts of merchandise at stated times during farming season. In such a case the landlord is directly responsible to the merchant for the merchandise which the cropper receives. The interest charged on borrowed cash varies from 10 to 15 per cent, but in many cases

has been known to be considerably more. Furthermore, the interest on merchandise has been known to double itself notwithstanding the fact that the cropper pays a yearly interest upon the lump sum agreed upon for a cropping season of six or seven months, he receives his allotments of cash or merchandise in monthly installments.

The cropper who for one reason or another becomes dissatisfied and desires to transfer his service and that of his family from one landlord to another, has been known to do so by getting the landlord he wishes to serve to pay to the one he previously served the amount of debt the cropper owes. In case the agreement is made the cropper comes under contract of a new master bringing an interest-bearing debt. The amount paid in transferring croppers has been known to range from \$25 to \$200.

The cropper apart from a plantation is, of course, free from close supervision. He is more aggressive and trustworthy than the plantation cropper described above, and, therefore, is left largely to contract his own affairs. He may have been in previous years a renter who, through some misfortune, such as losing a mule, prefers working on halves until he can get sufficiently strong to rent again. In case this type of cropper owns a mule, the landlord rents it, as a rule, not by paying cash money but by making some agreement with the cropper equivalent to what a season's rent for one mule would be. If the cropper has feed for his own mule an agreement between landlord and cropper is fixed in some way by the landlord making allowances in some side crop, such as watermelons, sweet potatoes or sugar cane. It is the type of cropper described above that is on the verge of becoming a renter in case his crop turns out to be good.

Regardless of the success croppers may make with their crops, while working on shares, there is a burning desire among them for less supervision and more freedom in managing their own affairs. The opportunity of becoming renters offers a means of satisfying such a desire, and very often a cropper remains upon the same plantation, occupies the same house and rents the same land, and quietly transfers from cropper to renter without the least difficulty.

It is reasonable that in early years succeeding the Civil War both share-croppers and renters existed; but it is still more reasonable that renters were fewer in number, since renting required an accumulation of capital, such as, a mule, paid or partly paid for,

some feed for the mule, wagon and farming implements. As the years passed croppers went into the renting class, first, because they desired the management of their business in full; and, secondly, because the landlords were just as willing to free themselves from the close oversight of the cropper's affairs as the cropper was to be free. We have no figures to indicate just how rapid the transition into the renting class was, until the decade embracing 1890 and 1900. In this connection figures of Macon County, Ala., will be used. According to the agricultural census of 1900, the only census in which white and colored renters and share-croppers were taken separately the number of colored renters in Macon County was 2,097. The number of colored share-croppers was 760. The preceding census (1890) shows white and colored renters taken together to be 1068, and white and colored share croppers together to be 1,113. In 1900 the colored renters had increased nearly half of both white and colored renters for 1890. The colored share croppers of 1900 had decreased over one-third of both white and colored croppers in the same time. The increase of colored renters in 1900 over white and colored renters in 1890 in this one county gives some idea of the rapid change into the renting class.

A quarter of a century ago, one kind of renter was commonly found upon large plantations where wage-hands and share-croppers were employed. He was subject to the same plantation management as other classes upon the plantation. He received the same supervision, plowed, cultivated, harvested, and received advances in the same manner as the share-cropper. When his crops were behind, the landlord employed hands, cleaned out the crop while the renter stood the expenses. The only difference between the renter and the share-cropper was that the renter crops were not divided; and to the renter belonged whatever remained after rent, expenses of farming implements, cleaning out the crops and living were deducted. Under the nominal rent system more renters came out behind than ahead in their crops. In many of the black belt counties of the South, where changes for good in the plantation system occur slowly, this type of renter is found today.

The renter of today is a more independent type. He is responsible to the landlord for the rent of the land only in case he secures "advances" from his landlord. In many cases he sub-rents portions of his rented land receiving an amount little more than sufficient to



pay the landlord's rent. It is often the case that this type of renter owns from three to six mules, some or all of which are mortgaged and through this means of mortgaging his stock he receives "advances."

It is the desire of landlords to rent their land without the risk of giving "advances," or the care of close supervision. In other words, it is as much the desire, and as much to the advantage, of the landlord to get rent or interest on the money involved in land with least trouble, as it is the renter's desire to advance himself, and enjoy the privilege of managing his business affairs. The present trend of renting conditions—conditions which relieve the landlord of responsibilities and which put upon the renter more responsibilities—is in this direction.

Two decades ago the most common way the landlord or merchant secured himself against losses was by taking a lien on crops. The lien entitled the landlord to hold in possession all, or part of a renter's crop until all claims were paid. The lien was made not only upon growing crops, but often upon unplanted crops as well. If through the crop lien, the landlord's claim was not settled in one season it was continued into the next. The old crop lien system with all of its force and meaning has apparently changed in meaning and form in some indescribable ways and since the renter has gradually come into possession of personal property, money is secured for farming by making notes and mortgages upon that property. All these may have some features of the crop lien system, but do not have the name.

The managing ability of the average Negro renter is limited by the three mule farm. His yield and profit per plow decrease as the number of his plows increases. For example, a farmer made twelve bales with one plow; with two plows he made seven bales, and with three plows he made five and one-half bales to the plow. This was barely enough to cover the expense of three plows. Thus this farmer increased his acreage and expense while his knowledge of business and improved methods of farming remained the same.

The rent claims are first settled, and in most cases paid in cotton. The rent paid for a farm of 25 or 30 acres ranges from  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 bales of lint cotton. Paying rent in money is quite common in some sections. When money is paid as rent for a farm of one mule it ranges from \$75 to \$100. There are two advantages in the

payment of rent in money: first, the landlord receives a fixed rent for his land regardless of fluctuation in cotton prices; and, secondly, the renter gains in money as long as cotton remains at a good selling price.

This paper has been devoted principally to the discussion of the share-cropper and the renter because these classes have a relation with the soil and the plantation permanent enough to observe changes. It is evident that the daily, weekly, and monthly wage-earners have some influence upon the plantation system which is not discussed here.